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ABSTRACT

In beginning an address on the importance of the humanities to community college occupational education, one could draw from actual classroom experiences to illustrate the difficulties of teaching the humanities or the positive impact the humanities can have upon students; consider ways of building bridges between the humanities and technology; discuss those areas of knowledge that aren't amenable to scientific inquiry; or examine the need for individuals to recognize latent, yet powerful, societal influences, such as the maturation of the baby boom generation or the subtle impact of recordings on individuals' reactions to music. Central to all of these themes is the realization that study of the humanities provides the student with a mirror of life which strengthens the faculty of self-reflection. By studying the work ethic in literature, or by examining various cultures through their art and literature, the student acquires a new self-image that allows him/her to: perceive the relationships between life, work, and job; reflect on the meaning of habits and beliefs; and respond with reason and feeling to the social and natural environments. Surely, the cultivation of this self-reflection is as important for vocational students as it is for students of the liberal arts and, thus, it is incumbent upon educators to plan and implement methods of strengthening the humanities in vocational curricula. (JP)

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"DO IT WITH MIRRORS"

Keynote Address -- Conference on Strengthening
the Humanities in Occupational Education
Los Angeles, California

Myron Marty
February 4, 1981

Preparing a speech and writing an essay have this in common: the hardest part is getting started. As one writer put it, there is nothing at all to writing; you just sit there until those little red beads of blood appear on your forehead. The only way to get started is to start with something. If it works, keep it going. If it doesn't, try something else.

I thought I might start this keynote address by trading stories with you about life in community college classrooms, much in the manner that veterans of wars or college alumni recall shared experiences or oldtimers reminisce about hard times and good times of olden days.

+ We could compare, for example, the verbal neck-wringings we give to the chap who reappears in class after three weeks of absence and asks, "Did I miss anything?"

+ Or the next one, whose scores added together on four tests wouldn't give him a passing grade on one of them, and who hasn't handed in a single assignment, who asks a week before the end of the term: "What do I have to do to get a 'C'?"

+ We could talk of sad moments, like the one in which a very sincere, faithful-as-could-be but desperately lost young man comes into the office asking for help -- wearing a T-shirt that says "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

+ We could point to older students who heed the advice that they should go to college and do their thing -- and when they get there they discover they don't have a thing to do.

+ Or to mentally wounded Vietnam veterans who scare the wits out of us with unpredictable conduct -- like one I had who refused to be seated during an entire class session and held his hand inside his jacket as if he had a gun.

+ Or to those I call shoplifters, who sneak into the classroom and hope to make off with three credits without anyone noticing them.

We could talk, on the other hand, of testimonials -- such as the one given to me by a man in his thirties who claimed flat out that everything he had learned he learned in the college where I taught. He was a railroad employee, by the way, who was always "on call," with no regular work schedule. More than once our independent study sessions were interrupted by a summons to work. His would be just one instance of many giving evidence of a reawakening, a new birth, a new life, a new freedom. For some the new came early, right out of high school. For some it came in their thirties, for some even later. Sometime I'll tell you about a 72-year old's complaint that she didn't qualify as the oldest one in the class. A well-traveled 77 topped her.

But I was afraid that if I started this way I wouldn't be able to stop. The context for the humanities in community colleges is too rich a topic and the people in community college classrooms are too interesting to do justice to them here.

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So I thought about attempting an exploration of ways to build bridges between humanities and technology -- and note the technological metaphor in that humanistic notion. When I was toying with this idea I had just finished reading Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. There is much in that book to provide texts not only for explications but for sermons. When Pirsig writes, for example, that a motorcycle is nothing but a system of concepts worked out in steel, think of what we can say about an essay as a system of concepts worked out in words. How can we help someone who is able to handle one kind of system to grasp the other kind as well? That's a question for this conference.

There are other texts in this book, of course, like the one on teaching in what is euphemistically called a "teaching college": "...you teach and you teach and you teach with no time for contemplation, no time for participation in outside affairs. Just teach and teach and teach until your mind grows dull and your creativity vanishes and you become an automaton saying the same dull things over and over to endless waves of innocent students who cannot understand why you are so dull, lose respect and fan this disrespect out into the community. The reason you teach and you teach and you teach is that this is a very clever way of running a college on the cheap while giving a false appearance of genuine education." (p.140)

The humanities-sciences tension is a profound one. Happily, it is receiving renewed attention today -- attention that goes far beyond the two-cultures analysis that C. P. Snow gave it a generation ago. At the most sophisticated levels of discussion it is attention that calls for nature to be seen as non-deterministic, for life to be seen as unpredictable, exciting, a work of art.

(See Wil Lepowski, "Science and the Humanities: Bridging the Gap," Chemical and Engineering News, December 1, 1981, pp.21-26.) The game is not over. There is more to be determined than what the final score will be. Science has not won the day.

I hope that the humanities-science tension proves to be the subject of considerable debate in this conference. Indeed, I believe that to ignore it would be to miss an intellectual opportunity of the sort that does not appear very often. And in urging the debate, let me say that the purpose of this conference is not to argue over the relative merits of occupational or technological or scientific education as opposed to education in the humanities. Its purpose rather, is to find ways of strengthening the humanities in occupational education. Some other agency might wish to fund a conference on strengthening practical education in liberal arts programs -- but this, I must stress, is not such a conference. Should such a conference ever occur, Pirsig's book would make a good text.

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In my quest for an opening idea, I thought for a time about presenting an explication of the difference between scientific and humane education, between scientific pursuit of truth and humanistic pursuit of truth. The scientific way is clearly established: one formulates a hypothesis, tests it under carefully-controlled circumstances, and formulates a conclusion. In science the empirical, objective way is the only way.

In the humanities, it is different. The empirical way cannot work because the circumstances for testing most hypotheses cannot be controlled. And objectivity is an elusive goal, for obvious reasons. In the humanities, our ways of knowing bring to bear such things as insight and intuition rooted in experience. For each of us, our ways of knowing are different. And what we know humanistically is different, too, for there are elements in the world, in nature, in all the realms of humankind that are not knowable by the route of scientific inquiry.

To understand this realm, to understand it humanistically, requires us, as Michael Scruton has put it, to "cultivate the peculiar faculty -- the faculty of Verstehen -- which we use to understand ourselves." More simply, it requires cultivation of the habit of reflection: reflection on life, on things in life and nature, on relationships between elements in life and nature; on perspectives and angles and insights; on such things as irony and paradox.

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Every writer, at some point in his search for an opener, flirts with the notion of relevance. What in the contemporary

world offers a peg to hang an exciting opening paragraph on? As a historian, I am interested in what Bernard Bailyn calls "latent events" in contrast to "manifest events." Latent events he defines as "events of which contemporaries were largely unaware and which become discernible only in quantitative terms (shifts in birth rate, changes in family size or structure)" and manifest events, of course, are "matter of conscious concerns." (Michael Kammen, ed., The Past Before Us, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980, p.38)

A good many latent events fascinate me. The baby boom, for one, which, in its maturity, has inspired several interesting books regarding its effects. And those effects, incidentally, have profound implications for community colleges. Changes in patterns of perception also interest me, many of them influenced by changes in technology, but they are harder to quantify. It dawned on me that I was getting close to having an opener when I found myself wrapped up in reflection on the way in which for a century we have enlarged our technological capacities for repeatable experiences. The popularization of the camera almost precisely 100 years ago by George Eastman was the start of it. Why pay attention to an event if the event is repeatable innumerable times merely by looking at a photograph of it. Some years ago while on a summer vacation in a spectacularly beautiful area, we saw a man pull into a scenic overlook, get out of his car, position himself strategically, and shoot seven or eight pictures. No one else got out of the car. Why should they? They could look at the slides any time they wanted to when they got home. A repeatable experience.

Almost simultaneously with Eastman's popularization of photography came Edison's invention of the phonograph, and with it what John Philip Sousa called "mechanical music." "I foresee," he said, "a marked deterioration in American music and musical taste, an interruption in the musical development of the country, and a host of other injuries to music in its artistic manifestations, by virtue -- rather by vice -- of the multiplication of the various music-reproducing machines." How prescient he was:

> There was a time when the pine woods of the north were sacred to summer simplicity.... But even now the invasion of the north has begun, and the ingenious purveyor of canned music is urging the sportsman, on his way to the silent places with gun and rod, tent and canoe, to take with him some disks, cranks, and cogs to sing to him as he sits by the firelight, a thought as unhappy and incongruous as canned salmon by a trout brook. (Daniel Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience, N.Y.: Random House, 1973, pp 382-383)

The repeatable experience is carried with us in cassettes and now in video-cassettes. In its most sophisticated form, we have a

word for it: the instant replay. Think about how much of life is replay, if not an instant one. Every time the same, the same, the same. Look at the picture. Every time the same. Listen to a record, every time the same. Watch a football play, every time the same. Repeat, repeat, repeat. What effect does this have on perceptions?

And then I wondered: is the repeatable experience a new phenomenon? How mystical it must have been to hear an echo, to see a reflection in a pond! Who invented the mirror, I wondered. Looking in a mirror again and again, that was the first repeatable experience. Every time the same.

On second thought, not the same, for we are different every time we look in a mirror. Not only that, we are looking for different things and we see different things: a general impression, a hair out of place, a smudge or a blemish. Or we use a mirror to change our appearance, and we see the change in process.

On deeper second thought, repeatable experiences of other sorts are not really identical when repeated. To read a book a second time, to see a movie repeated, to come back again and again to a favorite work of art, to listen to a record over and over again: these are not identical experiences, for we are different at each seeing, at each listening. Because we are different each time, our experiences are different.

That was it: No wonder the report of the Commission on the Humanities begins like this:

> Nailed to the ship's mast in Moby Dick is a gold doubloon stamped with signs and symbols "in luxuriant profusion." The coin is Captain Ahab's promised reward to the crewman who sights the white whale, but in its emblems each man reads his own meaning. As Ahab says, "This round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.
>
> Like the bright doubloon, the humanities mirror our own image and our image of the world. Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question "what does it mean to be human?" The humanities offer clues but never a complete answer. They reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope, and reason.
>
> We learn how individuals or societies define the moral life and try to attain it, attempt to reconcile freedom and the responsibilities of

> citizenship, and express themselves artistically. The humanities do not necessarily mean humaneness, nor do they always inspire the individual with what Cicero called "incentives to noble action." But by awakening a sense of what it might be like to be someone else or to live in another time or culture, they tell us about ourselves, stretch our imagination, and enrich our experience. They increase our distinctively human potential. (The Humanities in American Life, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p.1)

In the humanities, in other words, we "do it with mirrors." It, in this context, is pursuing knowledge, seeking truth, coming to terms with the worlds around us. I had my opener.

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For an opener to make sense, a speaker or writer must be clear on purpose. I knew all along what my purpose would be. It is threefold: (a) To encourage you to think about the humanities, and more explicitly, to think about the humanities in occupational education; (b) to provoke you to care about the humanities, and more explicitly, to care about the humanities in occupational education; and (c) to prompt you to do humanities, and more explicitly, to do humanities in occupational education. Thinking, caring, and acting -- that is what this conference is all about. In fact, that is what education is all about. Each of the elements is essential to the other two.

In this context, it is fair to ask, what are the humanities? That question can be answered by referring to the definition of the humanities given in the legislation that created the National Endowment for the Humanities. Or, better, it can be given in functional terms. My functional definition is this: The humanities encompass those studies that help students (a) to find and make sense out of relationships between their life, work, and jobs; (b) to see themselves and their society from different angles, different times, different places, and through different eyes; (c) to reflect on the meaning of their doings, habits, and beliefs; and (d) to respond with both reason and feeling to their natural and man-made environments. Standing alone each of these functions may be cultivated apart from the humanities. Taken together, the essential presence of the humanities is taken for granted. If school or school-related activities do these things -- whether they are called history, literature, philosophy, or cultural anthropology or something else -- they are humanities.

The test of this functional definition of the humanities might be whether each of its parts is related in a contributing way to cultivation of the capacity for Verstehen. That is the peculiar faculty, you will recall, that Roger Scruton argues we use to

understand ourselves. It is also what we use to understand the world around us. Admitting that this notion is, on the face of it, obscure, he gives a simple example to show that it contains a truth:

> A portrait consists of pigments spread upon a canvas, and from the scientific point of view that is all it contains. But of course it is also a law of nature that beings like us will react to portraits in certain complex ways. This law of nature has never been formulated, but in any case we can dispense with it. For we understand portraits without its aid. We see these colored patches as a face and, seeing them so, gain access to the human reality of the picture. The face is not an additional feature of the portrait, above and beyond the colored patches that make it up. But we do not see the face if we look only at the colored patches. The human reality of these patches is not their scientific reality, because it comes to us mingled with our manner of perception. It is we who put the face in the picture; but it is there to stay, and we are obliged, if we can, to understand it.

Scruton continues:

> I think that the suggestion that there is a "human world" which is observable only to the person who has, and who cultivates, human understanding takes sustenance from such examples. It is obvious that the face in the picture is both objective -- it belongs in the world -- and yet not truly separable from our human capacity to recognize it.... The capacity to see this fragment of the human world can be cultivated, developed, educated. ("Humane Education," The American Scholar, Autumn 1980, pp.491-492.)

The portrait, to go beyond Scruton now, is a mirror. What we see in it is a reflection of what we bring to it: our experience, our values, our insights -- all the things that have been formed and developed by looking in other mirrors.

If, then, as we said earlier, we want to help students make sense out of the relationships between their life, work, and jobs, we need mirrors -- texts, that is, visual images or written words to reflect what people bring to them, to give them something in return.

So how does one make sense out of relationships between life, work, and jobs: by studying life, work, and jobs in history and literature. The mirrors are there. What a mirror it is that lies in a comparison of the American work ethic with the Russian work ethic. Or in a tracing of the Puritan ethic in its industrial applications. Or in a study of literature on child labor, on labor

unions, on the interplay between jobs and work -- with work understood as the fulfilling side of life, the artisan side, and jobs as the survival side of life, the foodgathering side. What a mirror there is in the American dream and the myths surrounding it.

How do individuals see themselves and their society from different perspectives? By looking in the mirror of time, the mirror of place, the mirror of culture. Do you read a book, particularly a novel, for what the book tells you about a time or place or even the author of the book? Maybe so. Even more, though, you read it for what it tells you about you. You read it for the mirror that it is. By transplanting yourself to other times, other places, other cultures, you come to better understandings of your own time, your own place, your own culture. Perspective is the mirror.

How do you come to understand your doings, your habits, your beliefs? By holding them up to the mirror of the humanities. The habit of reflection -- that is what the humanities seek to develop. You compare your doings, judge your habits, test your beliefs against what you see in others. And you understand others better in the process.

What is the nature of your response to the mirrors around you? Part of it is a reasoned response: you analyze, synthesize, integrate, interpret, and apply your conclusions to new situations, new circumstances. But you also respond with feeling -- feelings of joy, sorrow, relief, pain, anticipation, excitement, disappointment, hope, faith, discouragement, disbelief, optimism, pessimism, cynicism -- on and on the range of feelings runs. And the range of stimuli is the whole range of the human experience, from birth to death. In seeing the humanities as a mirror, you find a way to come to terms with those things in nature that defy or elude scientific analysis.

I must raise some cautions: the first one is that the humanities can be a mirror. They can do good things for those who come in touch with them, or better, immerse themselves in them. They do not do these things automatically, mechanically, predictably, unfailingly. The faculty of Verstehen, the habit of reflection, is essential for the humanities to work such good as they can work. It is a faculty that is developed only by use.

The second caution is this: I have perhaps made the whole business sound too mystical. Let me make a practical application. Some years ago a student appeared, strictly by chance, in one of my classes. She was going back to school. Mid-thirties, unsure of herself academically, full of enthusiasm otherwise. Would it be all right, she ventured to ask, to do as her major project a family history, telling the story of a Norwegian forebear's immigration. Why not. She set to thinking about it. And she cared. And she acted. The results were good for both of us. She is now completing

a master's degree in history, writing her thesis, of course, on Norwegian immigration. By allowing myself to be drawn into her work, I began to think about family history as a field of study, to care about it, and to act accordingly. A second book, a humanistically oriented one, is emerging from the transformation induced by the mirrors used in that experience.

A second application: Several years ago a consultant worked with a community college that placed significant numbers of its students in jobs in other countries. They came to think together about developing a course on work in contrasting cultures. A good mirror. They cared about it. They acted -- but only to a point. They couldn't get the college to pull together on it, and, so far as I know, the idea waits for implementation.

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An address with so many false starts as this one may by this time appear to be incoherent, so let me go back over its main points: Its purpose, once it got started, was to spur thinking, caring, and acting in the humanities. Humanistic thinking, I contend, is thinking growing out of the habit of reflection or, if you prefer the other term, the faculty of Verstehen. The humanities are the mirror against which and through which one develops this habit, this faculty.

That this habit is just as important for persons pursuing careers in business, health care, or the technologies, seems obvious. So, therefore, does the obligation to strengthen the humanities elements in occupational education. That, it seems to me, must be the key note of this conference.

Most of the conference will be devoted to the question of how one accomplishes this. And part of the effort of the conference will be devoted to demonstrating both how a federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, has helped institutions in their efforts and how it stands ready to assist others. The thought of coming to a federal agency for help can be a forbidding one. There is that great big thing called the federal government, and in it is the executive branch, and in it is this agency, and in it are six divisions, and in each division are some programs, and where in the world do you fit in!

I would urge you to see this agency from the inside out, just as I think you should see your institutions from the inside out when the time comes to call for help. You, the faculty member are at the center of the institution. You may be surrounded by a committee, surrounded by a department, surrounded by a division, surrounded by an administration, surrounded by an institution, maybe even surrounded by a system. Forget for a moment what surrounds you, think only of yourself as the center. And then find the center of help for you at the Endowment. That center is the

program officer. Don't worry, for the moment, about the rest. After your initial contacts, the rest will make sense, and it surely won't seem so imposing.

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And yes, I did say that there are a lot of good texts in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. One of them would provide a good ending for this address: At the end of the long motorcycle odyssey, eleven-year-old Chris asks his father, "Can I have a motorcycle when I get old enough?"

"If you take care of it."

"What do you have to do?"

"Lots of things. You've been watching me."

"Will you show me all of them?"

"Sure."

"Is it hard?"

"Not if you have the right attitudes. It's having the right attitudes that's hard."

But my sense of parallelism in construction tells me that an essay should have as many endings as it has beginnings. Parallelism will not prevail in this one. This address will have more endings than it has beginnings -- not the endings I give it here, but the endings you write to it in this conference and when you return to your institutions in Colorado, California, Wyoming, Oregon, Hawaii, Arizona, Iowa, Washington, Utah, Nevada, Texas, Kansas, and Wisconsin. It is not unreasonable, I think, to assume that your presence here is a clear indication that you are on the way to accomplishing the hardest part of your tasks. I wish you well. I look forward to receiving word of the endings you write.

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